

Approaching Invisibility

**Experiencing the Photographs and Writings
of Minor White**

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of Minor White**

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for Clare

It is only with the heart that one can see rightly;
what is essential is invisible to the eye.

Antoine de Saint-Exupery

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Abstract

Within his published writings on photography Minor White (1908-1976) makes frequent use of the term 'invisible'. While his use of this term is always suggestive, often provocative, and sometimes allusive, his meaning is rarely made clear. Nonetheless, White appears to refer to *intangible aspects of photography that go beyond the visible elements of photographs themselves*. This thesis aims to elucidate White's use of the term 'invisible' by determining (i) precisely what he is referring to in his use of this word, (ii) where the 'invisible' resides, and (iii) how it is encountered.

In order to achieve these objectives a close examination and analysis of the writings of White is made, with particular emphasis being given to fifteen identified uses of the term 'invisible'. Since White's use of this term is always open to interpretation it is first necessary, however, to establish a comprehensive foundation from which explanations can be made. Hence, the first chapter of the thesis provides a brief overview of the formative years of White's life up until 1946. On the basis that six of the fifteen uses of the term 'invisible' refer directly to Alfred Stieglitz and/or his theory of 'equivalence', an analysis of 'equivalence' from the perspectives of Stieglitz and White respectively will be given in chapters two and three. The theory of 'equivalence' invests a photograph with an ability to express more than its literal representation, in doing so the viewer's subjective experience is paramount. In addition to analysis of the writings of Stieglitz and White the writings of post-Stieglitz photographic critics and commentators such as Peter Bunnell, Joel Eisinger, Allan Sekula and John Szarkowski are also examined.

The thesis then assigns each of White's uses of this term to one of three categories developed in my research and reflection that I have named 'extra-invisibility' 'intra-invisibility' and 'inter-invisibility'. Thus it will be shown that the majority of the occasions on which White uses the term 'invisible' pertain both to the viewer's experience of photographs and to the affective qualities of the photograph. While the meaning of White's term 'invisible' is not always the same, the thesis concludes that the usage that dominates within his writing, pertains to feeling states that are evoked within a viewer's internal world via his or her interaction with a photograph. How such experiences of invisibility are encountered is thus determined by the viewer's personal background and approach to the photograph, by the social context in which the image is seen, and, to some extent, by the visible elements of the photograph itself.

Introduction

Some photographs are better than others, for reasons that we do not understand.¹

There are many explanations for why the quality of one photograph is superior to another. Some of these reasons are more easily grasped than others because they pertain to the tangible and material elements of photographs, such as lighting, composition, camera angle and print quality. Sometimes one photograph is better than another simply due to its subject matter. Yet beyond all of these tangible attributes of photographs there is occasionally another sense, something less tangible, which cannot be understood via formal visual analysis. These intangible qualities are not 'visible' in the surface of photograph itself. If they exist anywhere, they exist within the viewer, and they are part of that person's experience of the photograph. Thus the photograph functions as a foundation for potential experience. It triggers something within the viewer. While it is not possible to measure the potential experiences that a photograph might generate, I propose that some photographs are stronger than others because they have a greater evocative potential. They suggest more than they depict.

As a practicing photographer and a teacher of photography, the intangible aspects of why some photographs are better than others have been a constant source of wonder, indeed, they have provided the starting point for this thesis and its research. To explore these intangible qualities of photographs, and more importantly to understand them, I will examine the photographs and writings of Minor White.

Minor White (1908-1976) is more than an important post-war, American photographer. He contributed significantly to the photographic community as a writer, curator, editor, educator, champion of photography as a fine art and, to some, as a spiritual guru. While White is not as well known or celebrated as Alfred Stieglitz or Edward Weston – two key photographic influences on White – what he brought to photography was both substantial and unique. Similarly, White's name may not be as familiar to readers of photography as others of his generation, such as Ansel Adams or Henri Cartier-Bresson. White's impact on American photography from the 1950s to the 1970s is thus difficult to ignore, as is his influence on other photographers of this era such as Paul Caponigro, Jerry Uelsmann, Peter C. Bunnell, Peter Turner and Nathan Lyons.²

White's major works are both keenly observed and brilliantly crafted. As with many modern

¹ John Szarkowski, *Mirrors and Windows: American Photography since 1960*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1978, p. 21.

² See Ansel Adams et al *Minor White, A Living Remembrance*, (*Aperture 95, Summer 1984*), New York: Aperture, 1984; and Jonathan Green *American Photography: A Critical History 1945 to the Present*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1984.

photographs, *what* is photographed is often of less interest than the actual photograph and its affective qualities. Most of us are familiar with photography's documentary power, that is, its ability to record what is before the camera with immediacy, clarity and an arguably high degree of objectivity. Yet while being aware of the camera's documentary power, White is often more concerned with its non-literal expressive power, or what he refers to as its "transforming power".³ This is not to say that what is physically photographed is unimportant but rather that White is more concerned with what can be conveyed or evoked in the viewer's experience. As will be shown, White's approach to photography is unique in many ways. This is due in part to his background as a poet, to which he owes his lyrical usage of both words and photographs, and to the many influences that are evident in his writings. Such influences include theatre, psychology, Catholicism, Buddhism and Taoism.

In looking at White's photographs, some viewers may be baffled or bemused as to the significance of and/or identification of what was actually in front of the camera, while others may respond to the aesthetic elements of the image, such as its qualities of lighting and composition. Yet there is frequently more to White's photographs than what is visible on the surface of the image, quite apart from either the subject matter or the visual aesthetics of the image. While this trait is not unique to White as a photographer, nor to photography as a medium, White's particular approach to photography is the focus of this thesis. Beyond the visible elements of White's photographs, viewers may encounter in their experience of his images something which transcends reason, verbal language and, indeed, the photograph itself. Certainly, such experiences depend on the subjective position of the viewer of the image and what he or she expects or wishes to obtain from a photograph. These intangible experiences which go beyond the photograph's visibility I will refer to as the 'viewer's experience of invisibility'; the exploration of such experiences is the central objective of this thesis.

Any viewer may experience such intangible or invisible qualities in any photograph, not only White's. However, the capacity for such experiences is stronger with some photographs than others. While many of White's photographs may possess a powerful potential to evoke experiences of 'invisibility' within a viewer, the work of other photographers such as an identity photograph of an unknown subject may have little affect. White has been chosen as the subject of this thesis not only due to the potential for experiences of 'invisibility' via engagement with his photographs but also because much of what he wrote centred around his belief in transcending the visible aspects of photography, and educating both photographers and viewers in ways of approaching 'invisibility'. In one of White's most provocative uses of the term 'invisible' within his writings he proposes, "The function of camera work, when treated as a treasure, is to invoke the invisible with the visible." White frequently refers to 'photography' as "camera work" or "camerawork" in order to distinguish his approach to photography from

³ Minor White, 'Equivalence: The Perennial Trend', in *Photographers on Photography*, Nathan Lyons (ed), New Jersey, USA: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966, p. 170. Originally published in *Photographic Society of America Journal*, Vol. 29, No. 7 (July 1963), pp 17-21.

more conventional approaches.⁴

To explore this notion of 'invisibility' and photography a close examination will be made of White's photographs and writings, with due emphasis given to the latter. Within the context of these two parameters this investigation has seven central aims: to understand and clearly express what this quality of 'invisibility' is; to articulate exactly what is 'invisible', for White, in the 'viewer's experience of invisibility'; to determine whether White's notion of the 'invisible' resides within the photograph, the photographer, or the viewer; to assess why some photographs provide a greater potential for experiences of 'invisibility' than others; to ascertain how factors such as the context in which the photograph is seen, the viewer's approach to the image, the individual viewer, the subject matter of the photograph and the visual aesthetics of the image are significant in triggering or guiding the viewer's experience of a photograph; to examine the influence of Stieglitz and his theory of Equivalence on White's own photographs and writings; and finally to provide both an understanding and an approach to White's work, which will increase the reader's awareness and appreciation of both White's photographs and his writings.

Having demonstrated that particular approaches to White's photographs will evoke personal experiences of 'invisibility' within individual viewers, the reader of this thesis should then be able to apply this approach to all photographs – identity photographs included. In order to achieve the seven objectives outlined above detailed analyses of each use of the term 'invisible' in White's writings will be provided along with explanations of the varying contexts in which he employs this word. While White's use of this term is always suggestive – and often provocative – it is frequently open to interpretation. Hence it will be necessary to refer to other texts by White in order to come to a less equivocal understanding of White's usage of the term 'invisible'. Reference to the texts of other commentators and critics on White, and to theorists on photography in general, will also support this investigation. Once the various occasions of White's usage of the term 'invisible' have been noted and examined, a stronger and more coherent understanding of both White's writing and of his photography will be formulated.

While a large number of White's writings were published during his lifetime in a variety of books and journals, many important documents, such as White's personal journal entries, letters and interviews, were only published posthumously. Of the writings published during White's lifetime most appeared in *Aperture*, the journal which White co-founded in 1952 with Ansel Adams, Milton Ferris, Dorothea Lange, Ernest Louis, Barbara Morgan, Beaumont Newhall, Nancy Newhall and Dody Morgan.⁵ Subsequent to its foundation White was the editor of *Aperture* for twenty three years. During this period White's editorial control held a strong sway over the fine art photography community. At the time of completing this thesis, five books have

⁴ Minor White, 'The Way Through Camera Work', *Aperture*, 7: 2, 1959, p. 73. White's use of the terms "camera work" or "camera work" throughout his writings are also an overt allusion to Stieglitz's journal *Camera Work* and his approach to photography.

⁵ R. H. Cravens, 'Visions & Voices: A Celebration of Genius in Photography' in Harris, Melissa (ed.), *Photography Past Forward: Aperture at 50*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2002, pp 9-10.

been published on White. Of these the most important is White's own *Mirrors Messages Manifestations*, published by Aperture in 1969. Along with White's photographs, *Mirrors Messages Manifestations* collects both earlier and, at that time, recent writings by White, most of which were previously unpublished. This book was published during White's lifetime. Four publications appeared after White's death: *Minor White: Rites and Passages* in 1978; *Minor White: A Living Remembrance* in 1984; *Minor White: The Eye That Shapes* in 1989; and *The Moment of Seeing: Minor White at the California School of Fine Arts* in 2006.

In the last year of White's life he worked on a collaborative production with James Baker Hall and Michael E. Hoffman which became the book *Minor White: Rites and Passages*⁶ first published in 1978, two years after White's death. As with *Mirrors Messages Manifestations* this is a collection of White's photographs that includes selections from White's previously published writings. It also includes previously unpublished letters by White and a biographical essay by Hall. *Minor White: A Living Remembrance*⁷, first published in 1984, contains both photographs and previously published writings by White, along with photographs and written commemorative recollections of White by his various colleagues and students. The most significant critical monograph is Bunnell's *Minor White: The Eye That Shapes* which includes photographs by White, both previously published and unpublished writings by White, and indispensable biographical information on the photographer. Along with *Mirrors Messages Manifestations* this book is a vital source for any scholar of White. The most recently published book on White is *The Moment of Seeing: Minor White at the California School of Fine Arts*⁸ which focuses on White's teaching years at the California School of Fine Arts (CSFA). It includes photographs by White, and other teaching staff and students at CSFA, and writings by White both previously published and unpublished. In addition to these five books, and despite White's relative fame, there is only a limited number of publications by other commentators and critics available that include texts on White.⁹

For the purpose of pursuing this investigation into White's uses of the term 'invisible' an overview of White's life and work will be given up until 1946, to provide the necessary background information and events of key significance. As White states, "That one year, 1946, was a very crucial one."¹⁰ By this stage he had met all of the relevant people who had significant influences in forming White as a photographer. This survey will constitute the first

⁶ *Minor White & James Baker Hall, Rites & Passages*, New York: Aperture, 1978.

⁷ Adams et al, *op. cit.*

⁸ Stephanie Comer & Deborah Klochko, *The Moment of Seeing: Minor White at the California School of the Arts*, San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2006

⁹ See, for example, A. D Coleman *Light Readings*, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998; Joel Eisinger's *Trace and Transformation: American Criticism of Photography in the Modernist Period*, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999; Melissa Harris (ed.), *Photography Past Forward: Aperture at 50*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2002; Andy Grundberg *Crisis of the Real: Writings in Photography, 1974-1989*, New York: Aperture, 1990; Estelle Jussim & Elizabeth Lindquist-Cock *Landscape as Photograph*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985; Roger Lipsey *An Art of Our Own: The Spiritual in Twentieth Century Art*, Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 1988; and Szarkowski *Mirrors and Windows* *op. cit.*

¹⁰ *Minor White* quoted in 'Minor White' in Paul Hill & Thomas Cooper, *Dialogue With Photography*, Manchester: Cornerhouse Publications, 1994, p. 270.

chapter of this thesis, 'The Visible Man'. This chapter will briefly explore White's formative years as a student of botany and Romantic poetry, his entry into the world of photography, both as a photographer and as a teacher. Additionally, it will examine the time White served as a USA infantryman in the Pacific islands during the Second World War and the impact this had on White's life. Important as this background is, the majority of White's work as a photographer, writer, curator, editor and educator was accomplished after the Second World War. The most critical part of the first chapter is devoted to explicating the many significant events in White's life during this post-war period, including his meetings with Stieglitz and Weston in 1946; the impact of Stieglitz's theory of Equivalence on White; White's curatorial and teaching positions in various educational institutions; and his previously mentioned position as the editor of Aperture.

In order to understand and appreciate White's use of the term 'invisible' it is essential to comprehend both Stieglitz's theory of Equivalence and the concept of the Equivalent, since the majority of White's uses of this term relate directly to Equivalence.¹¹ As Joel Eisinger notes:

An equivalent is a straight photograph, precisely representational, but it stands for more than what it represents in that it serves as a metaphor for subjective experience, or inter-subjective experience, or even mystical experience.¹²

Given that Stieglitz's theory of Equivalence both preceded and strongly influenced White's theory of Equivalence, it is important to examine Stieglitz's writings on the issue; this will be done in the second chapter, 'Stieglitz and Equivalence'. With reference to the writings of the photography historians Eisinger and Sarah Greenough¹³, this chapter will also examine the influence of both music and Wassily Kandinsky on Stieglitz and on his theory of Equivalence. Most notably, this chapter will also discuss and analyse Allan Sekula's critical 1975 essay 'On the Invention of Photographic Meaning', which examines the work of both Stieglitz and White and utilises a significant term for this thesis, namely the "affective" power of photographs.¹⁴

Unlike Stieglitz, whose writings on Equivalence are limited, White wrote about Equivalence on

¹¹ I have adopted the use of capital letters for the terms 'Equivalence' and 'Equivalents' because this is what White himself does in his major article on this topic, 'Equivalence: The Perennial Trend'. Stieglitz never actually used the term 'Equivalence' in any of his writings or accounts of conversations with Stieglitz by other writers. However, he did use the term 'Equivalent' on many occasions as a title for his photographs of clouds.

¹² Eisinger, *Trace and Transformation* op. cit. p. 7.

¹³ Sarah Greenough, 'Alfred Stieglitz and "The Idea of Photography"', in Alfred Stieglitz, *Alfred Stieglitz: Photographs and Writings*, U.S.A.: Bullfinch Press, 1999.

¹⁴ Allan Sekula, 'On The Invention of Photographic Meaning', in *Photography Against the Grain*, Halifax, Nova Scotia: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1984, pp 3-21. Originally published in *Artforum*, vol. XIII, no. 5, 1975.